STUFFED CLUBS and ANTIMACASSARS

Accounts and tales of early Fairbury, Illinois

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CHAPTER IV

Horses

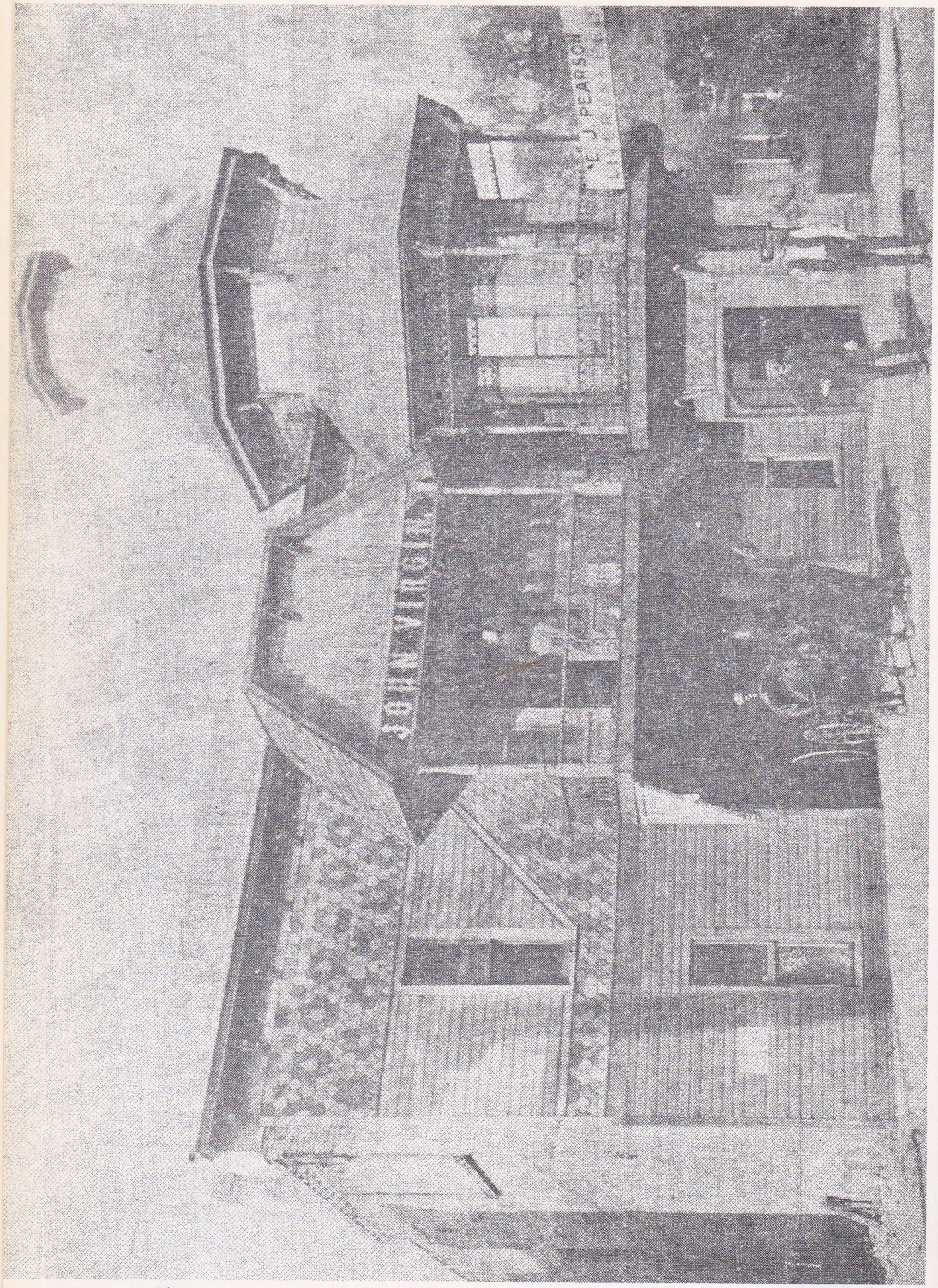
Fairbury was one of the three big horse centers of Central Illinois; the other two being Normal and Washington. The outlying farms formed a large breeding and growing district, and Fairbury's monthly community sales drew crowds of buyers. To advertise, the breeders organized frequent parades of the roadsters and big farm horses, which were sometimes led by the Fairbury Cornet Band. At Christmas time they held shooting matches for spans of good work animals.

An additional form of promoting the horse business was the Fairbury Driving Association. In October, 1889, the men met to organize in the rear room of Doctor Lewis' office. T. A. Beach was elected president, and the members were George Scriven, W. C. Wade, H. B. Taylor, P. C. James, Benjamin Cumpston, John and Nimrod Mapel. They applied for membership in the American Trotting Association and expected to join the Illinois Valley Circuit. The main purpose of their Association, however, was to stimulate the racing at the Fairbury Fair with improvements of the track, and by raising three-thousand dollars to be offered in prizes.

John Virgin was the wealthiest of the Fairbury horse dealers, and he made frequent trips to France to buy the fine Norman stock which had been developed in Europe for the purpose of carrying knights clad in their heavy armor. Fifteen hundred dollars was a common price for one of Virgin's horses, and he had a twelve-thousand dollar draught team which he exhibited at state fairs throughout the mid-west.

Virgin's sales barn was the largest and most elaborate in the town. His "palatial horse parlors" were just off Main Street, on the southwest corner of Walnut and North Third. They were built around a courtyard, which faced the alley and had an open well. The front of the building was brick, with cupalos. At the corner there was a very ornate tower featuring a double roof effect, and a balcony which went around the tower and half way across the front of the building.

In the rear was his livery stable, where horses could be left to be cared for at ten cents an afternoon. For the convenience of ladies waiting for their horses to be harnessed and brought



Virgin's palatial horse parlors, 1888.

around, there was a private room on the first floor, next the alley, with its windows properly covered with heavy lace curtains against the gaze of any inquisitive persons.

At the other side of the building, in the base of the tower, was Virgin's office. This was a very popular gathering place for the men, for it contained an abundance of comfortable chairs, and there were racks around the walls filled with various farm and stock publications. Actually, it was a public reading room for stock men, horse fanciers and farmers.

John Virgin was born in Tippecanoe County, Indiana, in 1838, and came to Illinois in 1855 to farm three-hundred acres in Avoca. During the Civil War he was Orderly Sergeant, and afterwards he moved to Fairbury where he became postmaster, president of the Fairbury Fair, president of the Farmers Institute, trustee of Illinois Wesleyan University, vice president of the Illinois State Fair, and a member of the committee to choose the site of the Chicago World's Fair.

Grant McDowell was another horse dealer who made a couple of trips to Europe to buy horses for import; and there was Percy James, who brought in horses from Texas and the Cherokee Reservation; and Austin Harrington went to New York State for the Percherons of Harrington and O'Brien, to mention only a few of the dealers.

Children remembered Austin, because they lingered on their way to school to watch in fascination, as he exercised one of the great stallions in the street by circling it about him with a rope.

The Mapel Brothers, John and Nimrod, were also prominent in the horse business. They had a store on Main Street where they sold wagons, buggies, and implements, but they were chiefly known for their fine handmade harness. They employed eight harness-makers who made several hundred sets a year, which were shipped to every state in the Union.

Their store was another favorite loafing place of the older men. They sat around the stove in winter, and in the summer time they moved their chairs out on the side walk in front of the store window. The glass in the two big windows was the largest in Illinois at the time they were installed, and in one of them always stood a life-sized, dapple grey horse made of wood. It had a mane and tail of real horse hair, and it was wonderfully life-like. It was a Fairbury landmark for many years.

CHAPTER VI

The Demon Rum

The third political party of Fairbury was the Prohibition. It was a potent one which cut across Republican and Democratic lines, to re-group again as the "drys", who were against the "wets".

Although Illinois was no longer a frontier state, the rough element had persisted, and it had been prolonged by the Civil War. There was a saying, common at the time, that there was "no law west of Chicago, and no God west of Dodge City." Illinois was on the border line; and, as before mentioned, Fairbury was already known as one of the toughest towns in the state.

The chief reason for this general atmosphere of lawlessness was the attitude of the public, everywhere, towards a drunkard. People reasoned that when a man was drunk he was not in possession of his normal faculties, and, therefore, he did not realize what he was doing. Consequently, he was not to be held accountable for any of his actions during that time. He could kill a man, yet go scott-free, whereas a man who was sober could be hung.

For instance, it took real courage for John Virgin to save Nigger Dick from the farmer who was tormenting him. The Civil War was over, but still, to the crowd which witnessed the battle, it was a fight between two white men over a colored boy, and the other white man was unquestionably drunk. It automatically put the onus of the affair on Virgin.

He was saved from lynching because a few men in the crowd of onlookers had witnessed the whole of the affair. They insisted that he had not been the aggressor, and so managed to stop the mob.

Virgin was a prominent citizen and was well-liked, but he was only being prudent when he stayed out of sight during the next few days while the public feeling subsided.

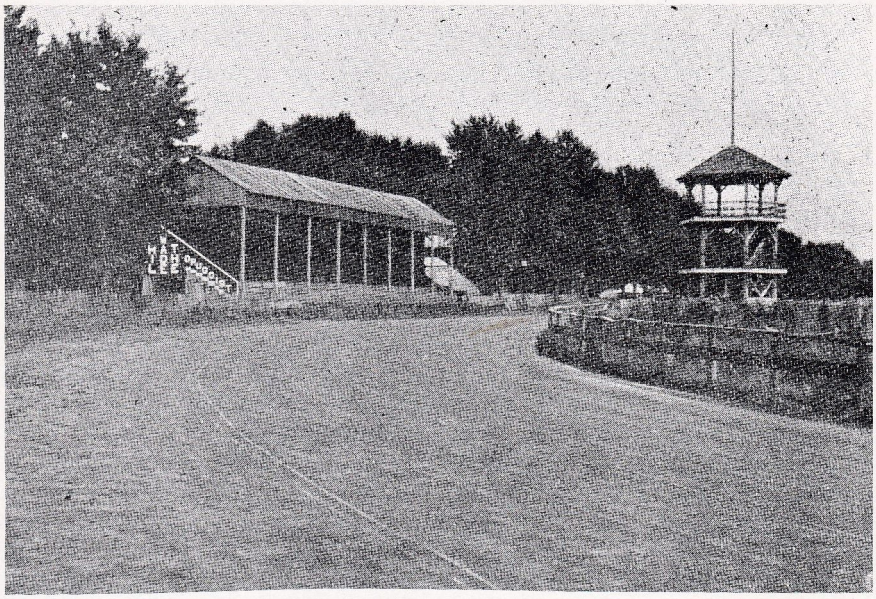
In Fairbury, not an evening passed without its fist and gun fights. Usually several of them were "good, bloody ones", and the doctors were busy afterwards.

Most of the altercations were genuine, but this early Fairbury had one bully who picked fights just for the fun of it. He was Joe Urrick, a butcher's assistant, and he was a huge man, a bully and

CHAPTER X

The Fairbury Fair

Fair week was homecoming in Fairbury. Married children returned with their families. Best friends were invited to come and spend the week, or longer. The amphitheater at the fairgrounds was filled with eager people happily waving at friends they had not seen in years. The gala atmosphere was irresistible. It lasted a whole week, if you counted the Monday of preparation, and the Saturday of hauling everything away.



The grandstand at the fairgrounds.

The first Livingston County Fair had been held in the Pontiac Court House Square, and Doc. Ostrander had served on the Board; but by 1876, the Fairburians were able to catch their breath after all their fires, and they determined to have one of their own. They gave their organization the name of "Fairbury Union Agricultural Board", and made John Virgin the first president. The Pontiac paper thereafter referred to it as "the pumpkin show."

A tract of land in the south part of town was bought for a permanent exhibition grounds, and this was frugally rented out for pasture between fairs. The high school held their track meets there, and for years the employees of the T. P. & W. and their

Another, but very small minority group of Fairbury citizens, were the negroes. The best known of these was "Nigger Dick," as everyone called him.

His real name was Richard Quarles, but he was known everywhere as "Side Hill Dick" because one leg was several inches shorter than the other. Everybody knew him, and he was generally seen with his shoeshine box over his shoulder, though he did do all kinds of jobs, even if he was continually drunk.

Dick had been born a slave, but during the Civil War he ran away from his owners to attach himself to John Virgin's regiment. He proved himself a good cook and otherwise made himself useful, and so he was allowed to stay. The men grew fond of the little cripple, and when peace was declared, Dick begged so hard to go along with them, that Virgin took the boy when he went back to Fairbury. Virgin became his protector, letting him sleep in his office, keeping an eye on him, and seeing to it that he did not go hungry.

One of the first things Virgin and the other men of the Union Army did upon their return to Fairbury was to compel the more violent of the Southern sympathizers to leave the country.

These people had been active all during the war, and were members of "The Knights of the Golden Circle", a secret society which supported the right of sesession of any state at any time. Out of their membership of three hundred thousand, eighty-five thousand were in Illinois, and they devoted themselves to sabotaging the Union efforts wherever possible. People called them "Copperheads", because they were considered to be as treacherous as a copperhead snake.

Very little was ever said about the Underground Railway in Fairbury to help free the slaves, either in the casual talk of the men around town, or in the several county histories published afterwards. That was because their secret activities were truly secret.

The portion of the "railway" which concerned Fairbury ran between Strawn and Odell. The Fairbury station was a little cabin back in the woods on the river near the Fugate farm, and one negro was known to be buried there on the river bank. Nothing is known of the activities. The men went out at night and came back at night.

One tale about them in the histories concerned Doc Ostrander. Probably the slave was sick, and he had been called to attend him.

At any rate, Doc found the man in fetters in a loft over one of the stores in Fairbury, waiting for his owners to come and take him away.

Doc drove the five miles to his home in Avoca for the tools to cut the chains. Then, with his own horse and buggy, he drove him to Chicago and saw him safe in the hands of the Abolitionist leader, and out of his own pocket paid the fugitive's boat fare to Canada.

There were a number of the Copperheads living south of Fairbury, who did not cease their activities with the end of the war, as Richard Crouch discovered. He himself was an Abolitionist, and in some way he incurred their displeasure. They decided to have a meeting at their school house and plan what they were going to do about it.

In some way, Crouch found out. He waited until dark, then, well before the men began to gather, he crawled in under the puncheon floor of the school house. The cracks in it were wide enough for a good view, and he could hear everything that was being said as they arranged to tar and feather him and ride him out of the community on a rail.

He let them go home undisturbed that night, but the next morning he hunted them up individually, and decisively thrashed them one by one.

They never dared touch him after that, but they did continue to be a malevolent influence. They were the cause of some apprehension, in 1870, when there was an election of township officers under the new 15th Amendment, and Nigger Dick had the honor of being the first colored man to cast an election ballot in Fairbury. To the satisfaction of everyone, the crowd of onlookers proved to be a good natured one, and everything went off in fine style.

There was one time, though, when Dick especially needed John Virgin to befriend him. A farmer, from north of Fairbury, had stopped too long in the saloons. As he came out into the street, he chanced to meet Dick and began to torment him. The negro managed to pull away from him and ran off down the street. Later they met again at the livery stable, and the farmer got to treating him still more roughly. This time, when he escaped, Dick threw a brick and hit him, and the man instantly gave chase. Dick fled down Main Street, but his crippled leg gave way, and

when the farmer caught him, he began to beat and kick him, yelling that he was going to kill him.

A large crowd quickly gathered. Virgin was among them, and when he realized what was happening, he took over, beat up the farmer, and got Dick to safety. The drunken fellow remained in the street, yelling and ranting, until the police finally arrested him.

Feeling ran high, and the criticisms were sharp among the crowd, which had gathered to see the fray. They felt that Virgin had been much too severe with him, since he was quite drunk, and therefore not to be held accountable for his actions. Fortunately, a few of the men had seen what had preceded the final battle, and they knew that it was the farmer, instead of Dick, who had been the aggressor from the beginning, and so the crowd gradually drifted away. Nevertheless, Virgin stayed out of sight for a day or two, and the farmer, having posted bond, went home to sober up.

Several days later he returned to town, hunted up Virgin, and made a handsome apology. Then, arm in arm, they walked to Squire Shepherd's office and settled for their breach of the peace, Virgin paying both fines.

Dick was found dead one day out in the country along the railroad tracks. It was Sunday morning, but a train was made up, and a lot of the men went out and brought him back to Fairbury for an inquest.

During Dick's time, Fairbury had a hundred or so negro inhabitants. They were always orderly and hard-working, and some of them are still remembered with affection.

Their children attended the public schools, and they had their own Methodist and Baptist churches and Sunday schools. Like the other churches, they held their camp meetings, which lasted some days and were well attended. Sometimes these were held at the fairgrounds, or in the woods south of town. At one service, the minister preached a rousing sermon about the Prodigal Son, after which the whole congregation partook of the fatted calf.

Like the other churches of the town, they needed to raise money, and their specialty was their annual Possum Supper, which they gave at the Hall. The suppers were well attended, as were their concerts. One of these latter featured melodies of the slave plantations, and a play expressly written for the occasion. It was a burlesque tragedy of the Ku Klux Klan.